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IN MEMORY OF WILLIAM H. R. RIVERS

1864 — 1922

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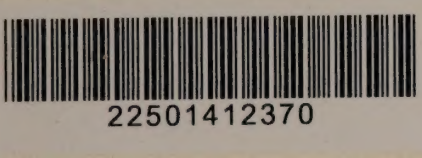
Although it has been twenty years since W. H. R. Rivers [1] died, those of us who must treat war neuroses and who do not wish to follow the rather barbarous methods invented in Germany, will study with much profit the experiences of this man. Besides this practical purpose, the story of his life is well worth remembering. Many medical men have done pioneer work and secured fame in the field of anthropology (Bastian, von Steinen, Rivet, etc.), many famous doctors have worked on the subject (Virchow, Freud, etc.), but no one except Rivers attained preëminence in both fields.

Born in 1864, Rivers was the son of a clergyman, but many from his father's family had been officers in the Navy. He made his first voyage in 1887 as a ship surgeon on a boat which went to America and Japan, and the following year 1888 received his M. D. degree at the University of London. In 1891 he entered the National Hospital, Queen Square, where he worked under Hughling Jackson and participated in the first brain operations of Victor Horsley. Here he met Henry Head, and this contact seems to have been decisive for his work in neurophysiology and experimental psychology during the following 15 years. During the summer of 1892 he studied in Jena. In 1893 he started lecturing in Guys Hospital on mental diseases, and at the same time he gave lectures at Cambridge on the physiology of the sense organs. Here he began planning one of the earliest systematic courses in experimental psychology in Europe, and certainly the first such course in England. In 1896 he went again to Germany to work with Kraepelin on some problems of mental fatigue. The article on "Vision" that he wrote in 1900 for Sir E. S. Schaefer's *Textbook of Physiology* is still regarded as one

[1] These notes are based mainly on the writings of Rivers; the address of Charles S. Myers, "The Influence of the Late W. H. R. Rivers," printed in Rivers' *Psychology and Ethnology*, London, 1926; the chapter "Rivers" in R. H. Lowie's *The History of Ethnological Theory*, New York, 1937; and on personal information from Prof. Adolf Meyer, Baltimore, Maryland, to whom I wish to express my sincere thanks.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of the most accurate and careful accounts of the whole subject in the English language.

In 1898 A. C. Haddons invited him to join the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Straits, for the purpose of making experimental psychological studies among the natives. Rivers accepted, and together with his former students C. S. Myers and W. McDougall he inaugurated this branch of physical anthropology which today seems destined to give a new outlet and impulse to the subject, going farther than the old skull and bone anthropology. Rivers carried on similar inquiries among the natives in Egypt in 1900, and among the Todas in India in 1901-1902. He came to the conclusion that no substantial difference exists between the visual acuity of civilized and uncivilized people, but he observed great differences in the frequency of color blindness in the different uncivilized persons whom he examined.

From 1903-1908 he made his famous studies with Henry Head on nerve sensibility, experimenting on Head's own arm. These experiments led them to the discovery of a crude punctate protopathic sensibility which is distinct from a more refined epicritic sensibility, still one of the basic assumptions of our neurophysiology.

In 1908 Rivers published (in the Croonian Lectures) his experimental studies on " The Influence of Alcohol and Other Drugs on Fatigue," and by changing the experimental methods he succeeded in obtaining entirely new and far more correct results than his predecessors.

When Rivers went with the Torres Straits Expedition in 1898, he went as a physiologist. Anthropology was so foreign to him that only a short time before he had rejected the library of his deceased uncle, James Hunt, as being of no use to him. When he returned from the Expedition, he had developed the most useful technique known for recording kinship nomenclature, and he had studied systematically the sociology of the Islands. Until his premature death anthropology retained his interest very strongly. He always considered his *History of the Melanesian Society* (1914), mainly a study of the social structure of the Melanesian tribes and the result of his 1908 expedition, as his most important contribution. In 1911 he changed from the position of an " evolutionist " to that of a " dif-

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fusionist." Although in this way he became more and more speculative, his emphasis on the importance of culture contacts and the blending of cultures was by no means useless, and some of his later studies (e. g. About the Disappearance of Useful Arts) are still of great value. His article on "Sociology and Psychology" (1916) is still the model of a sound (rather behavioristic) approach to the problem. With Tarde, Hahn, Marett, Boas, Levy-Bruhl, etc., Rivers was one of those who helped to overcome the too rationalistic interpretation of the primitive mind, which was characteristic of Tylor, Elie Reclus, Frazer, and Durckheim. From Rivers' posthumous papers J. Elliot Smith published an unfinished book on *Magic, Medicine and Religion* which in spite of its weaknesses is one of the few serious contributions to this problem.[2]

In 1922 Rivers edited a collection of *Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia*, and his discovery of the psychological roots of depopulation in Melanesia is still the best contribution to this highly alarming question.

Even more shocking than his conversion to "diffusionism" was Rivers' "conversion" to psychoanalysis during the last war. While serving as a medical officer in the R. A. F., he had to deal especially with psychoneuroses; following Freud's theories he discovered psychotherapeutic methods, the success of which could not be denied. But Rivers was far from being a slavish follower of Freud. He now tried to integrate all his former experiences in experimental psychology, sociology and ethnography with his psychopathological observations, in order to create a "biological theory for the psychoneuroses" (See his book *Instinct and the Unconscious*).

In 1922 Rivers accepted the position of Labour candidate to the House of Commons. His approach to his new task was the organic consequence of his past: "I cannot believe that political problems differ from those of every other aspect of social life in being incapable of solution by scientific methods." His first political studies on "red tape," repression and education, leadership, etc. are very promising. But Rivers was not destined to live what we would

[2] G. E. Smith published no less than five posthumous books of Rivers, and it is rather doubtful whether in so doing he served the memory of his deceased friend so much as he served his own sectarian purposes.

call the fourth chapter in his unusually rich existence. Death deprived us of not only a very interesting but also a highly useful experience.

This short survey gives only a very inadequate picture of the enormous field covered by Rivers' scientific activity. A later historian, regarding only his work and unaware of the real facts, could easily find remarkably planned progress in Rivers' thinking and activity. But such a conclusion would be only one of the numerous delusions which menace the interpreter who lacks sufficient material. It was only by chance that Rivers entered the National Hospital and became a psychologist, by chance that he went to Melanesia and became an anthropologist, by chance that he became a psychotherapist, and finally that he became a politician. In this lack of proper initiative he represented one of the most striking peculiarities of his race, for his making the best of new situations symbolized one of its best qualities.

Rivers was somewhat of an "introvert" with a certain background of timidity and over-conscientiousness. It seems not unlikely that just these traits pushed him to strict methods and such a fair understanding of "systems." An even dangerous enthusiasm was well hidden in his rigid personality. But his honest, generous character, his self-denying devotion to the cause he believed right and to the human being asking his help, won him respect and affection everywhere.

Rivers showed a moral courage which unfortunately is not always observed in scholars. He was not afraid to criticize, and to criticize publicly what he judged erroneous in his own former ideas, without regard for the consequences to his position which such an action could have. In 1911 as an established authority in anthropology, he could only undermine his position when he professed diffusionism in his presidential address to the Anthropological Section of the British Association. After almost 30 years of successful work in the field of experimental psychology, he had a reputation to lose when he professed Freudian ideas in 1916. Nevertheless he did. The results of these conversions may be appreciated quite differently, but no one can resist the charm of the "Faustian" attitude which is the very kernel and the goal of our own occidental culture.